

The sound world of historical keyboard instruments – its impact on the contemporary pianist, as seen through own performing experiences

Abstract

The reason I chose this research topic has its roots in the musical education I had received already in my first years of study, when I got familiarized with a historically informed approach of the pianistic repertoire I was working on. The later encounter with two prominent personalities – the pianist and musicologist Robert Levin and my harpsichord teacher, Gordon Murray – played an essential role in my orientation towards the historically informed performance practice and thus, towards playing historical instruments.

In the past decades, the historically informed performance practice (HIP), has awakened interest among musicologists, art critics, sociologists and philosophers. This current caused a profound change in the music world and was analyzed by theorists in all its aspects, in an attempt to understand, justify, or confute it. As a performer who has studied both modern piano and historical instruments, I was always fascinated by the various performance practice traditions and the way they influenced each other. Writings on this topic have abounded in recent decades, but they most often remain on a theoretical level, focused on philosophical and aesthetic issues, although research on musical interpretation takes now an increasingly important place in contemporary musicology.

This research aims to be an exploration of the practical aspects which I as a performer had to take into consideration in the process of understanding the musical work, when performing on historical instruments. Such an approach is common in the works of the British musicologist and pianist Mine Doğantan-Dack, who based her research on her own recordings, partly serving me as a model. The central point of this research are four case studies based on recordings which I have made on various historical instruments. In these case studies, I aim to analyze the process of adapting to the instruments, the preparation of the recording and the recording process itself, paying special attention to the influence these instruments had on my interpretive vision of the four recorded works.

Chapter 1 starts the thesis by making an introduction to the HIP, briefly presenting its historical premises, its evolution and the consequences of this evolution. In short, the HIP can be defined as a way of approaching the repertoire of the past eras, based on research and on the faithful observance of the composer's intentions, in the context of the interpretative practices of the time. Due to the fact that the possibility of making audio recordings only exists since the 20th century, it is impossible for us to know exactly how music was interpreted before 1900. Thus, the field of HIP additionally requires historical and musicological research of the original text, of notation systems, early instruments, musical treatises and, last but not least, of the socio-cultural context in which this music was created and performed.

The HIP started in the 1960s, as a reaction to modernism and its derived performance practices. Although it had its base on readily established ideals, such as respect for the composer's intentions and the search for historical truth, the current sought freedom from the modernist rigidity and the bodice of worshipping the written text as the ultimate goal. Despite the controversies which arose, mainly on the topic of authenticity, The Early Music Movement – as it was originally called – gained momentum thanks to musicians such as Nikolaus Harnoncourt, Gustav Leonhard, Anner Bylsma and Frans Brüggen. Due to technical advances in the field of audio recordings, the intimate nature of historical instruments could be captured and reproduced on a large scale. The socio-cultural reasons why the movement was so resoundingly successful have been extensively analyzed, from various perspectives, by some of the most important musicologists and philosophers. But beyond the theoretical debates, this current has been established primarily due to exceptional performers and ensembles, which have managed to attract audiences around the world towards the values they promote.

In Romania, the current has arrived with some difficulty, despite the fact that there exists a tradition of interpreting ancient music, especially Baroque, related to the churches with organs in Transylvania. In the academic environment, baroque music receives particular attention in the institutions that offer organ and harpsichord classes – the Music Academy in Cluj and the National University of Music in Bucharest. Several early music ensembles were formed here, the most important and long-lived of them being the *Collegium Musicum Academicum*, founded in Cluj in 1968.

Far from becoming obsolete, the historically informed performance practice is constantly evolving. The major music institutions in Western Europe and the United States have specialized departments for the study of early music, and hundreds of early music festivals take place around the world every year.

Chapter 2 represents a brief history of stringed keyboard instruments, which allows a better understanding of the issues addressed in the case studies presented in the next chapter. The history of keyboard instruments is very rich in events, especially during the last four centuries. In this paper, I have limited myself to stringed keyboard instruments because I consider the organ to be a very special instrument, with its own history and largely independent of that of the piano. I have therefore reviewed the main stages of the evolution of keyboard instruments, briefly explaining their functioning principles, in order to better understand their impact on the compositional process in different periods of music history, and the evolution of piano technique.

The history of keyboard instruments begins at the end of the 14th century, when the first mentions of a new invention called *clavicembalum* appeared. Graphic representations of harpsichords from before 1500 can be found in England, France, Sweden, Spain, Italy, Croatia and Austria, with large differences in construction and size, which proves, on one hand, the absence of a well-defined standard during this period, on the other hand, the fact that in the 15th century the harpsichord was already a widespread instrument, playing a prominent role in musical life. In the 16th century, the most important harpsichord builders were active in five major geographical areas: Italy, the Netherlands, Germany, England and France.

The clavichord was also very popular throughout Europe from its invention until the 17th century; from the 17th century on, in England and France it began to go out of fashion, but in the Germanic countries it remained of decisive importance until the end of the 18th

century. Composers like Bach, Haendel, C.P.E. Bach, Haydn, Mozart, or Beethoven are all known to have possessed at least one clavichord and often preferred it for their compositional activity.

After almost three centuries in which stringed keyboard instruments in Italy did not evolve significantly, around 1700, a builder named Bartolomeo Cristofori invented something that would revolutionize the construction of this type of instrument. In response to the growing demand of musicians to "render the harpsichord expressive", Cristofori built the first *Gravicembalo col piano e forte*, later called pianoforte or fortepiano. As the name suggests, this instrument had the ability to differentiate dynamically, which was attained by replacing the plectra that were plucking the strings with hammers covered with leather, which hit them. The inspiration for this new idea were probably both the harpsichord and the clavichord, the fortepiano promising to be an instrument superior to both. The instrument initially caused contradictory reactions, primarily due to the much softer and less penetrating sound than that of the harpsichord, which is why the latter continued to be preferred in theaters, as an instrument for accompaniment.

The two main schools of piano building were the Viennese, characterized by light instruments and fast mechanics, represented by builders such as Anton Walter and Johann Andreas Stein, and the English, with instruments which were heavier than the Viennese, with three strings for each note (as opposed to two for the Viennese), producing a stronger tone. Upon Beethoven's insistence, who had always wanted more powerful instruments, with a larger range (partly due to his declining hearing), Viennese builders began to borrow elements of English mechanics, thus creating – starting with the first decades of the 19th century – hybrid instruments, which finally ended up suiting the romantic ideal in terms of sonority.

In the 19th century, the center of piano building moved from Vienna to Paris, with representatives such as Sébastien Érard and Ignaz Pleyel. Pierre Érard invented the double escapement in 1821, a mechanism that still stands at the core of the piano construction; it facilitates the quick repetition of the same note, allowing the hammer to be operated again without lifting the key completely. The young Franz Liszt was so enthusiastic about this new invention that he signed a contract with Érard in 1824 and performed a concert tour in England the following year, playing only on his pianos and later making use of the potential of the double escapement in countless compositions. The double escapement mechanism was improved and simplified in 1840 by Henri Herz, a Viennese builder and pianist based in Paris. Currently, the differences between Érard-Herz mechanics and modern piano mechanics are only slight.

Over the last 100 years, no significant changes have occurred in the construction of pianos, therefore the instrument we now call the modern piano is in fact a product of the early 20th century. The most important innovation in the construction of pianos in the second half of the 19th century was the crossing of strings, placing the set of bass strings above all the others. The idea was patented in 1859 in the United States, by the German builder Henry E. Steinway. In fact, Steinway & Sons was the company that contributed the most to the development of the piano in the post-romantic period and in the 20th century. The cross-stringed construction technique was adopted by all the other companies, not only because it made the instruments more powerful, but also because it saved space, shortening the length of the piano.

The chapter on the evolution of keyboard instruments concludes with a brief presentation of the tuning systems used throughout history, given that musicians who turn to historical instruments have returned to the use of tunings specific to each era and each musical style.

Chapter 3 is the main chapter of the thesis and contains the four case studies. Each of them is structured as follows: first, a brief analysis of the interpreted work – which I consider to be a necessary first stage in the process of setting up an interpretive strategy, regardless of the instrument used – followed by information about the instrument and the conditions in which the recording was made. Thereafter, a presentation of the way that this experience has changed my understanding and interpretation of the work. This presentation takes a look at the changes which occurred, using several different parameters of interpretation and, implicitly, of piano technique.

In the first case study, I present my experience recording the *Chromatic Fantasy and Fugue* by Johann Sebastian Bach on the harpsichord. The possibility of dynamic differentiation through touch is insignificant on this instrument; therefore, articulation and agogics become the essential tools in shaping motives and phrases. In the process of searching for a meaningful interpretation of this work on the harpsichord, I learned that articulation can replace dynamics only if it is realized in all its complexity. The modern pianist, in general, associates the term articulation with three, maximum four possibilities: *legato*, *staccato*, *non legato*, possibly *portato/tenuto*. In some instances, especially from the Romanticism on, the pianist might encounter here and there a *legatissimo* or *staccatissimo* written in the score. However, these few variants are far from sufficient to create a coherent musical discourse, in the absence of dynamic differentiations. In this case study, I attempted to explain how I shaped the music in the absence of dynamic possibilities – and how the music has shaped me. The analysis is looking at three groups of parameters: dynamics and timbre; articulation, phrasing and fingering; tempo, agogics and arpeggiation. During the case study, I provided examples, both from the recording and from the score, in order to highlight the moments when the instrument required an adaptation on my side.

The means I used in order to reach an expressive performance of this work were so different on the harpsichord from those I had used on the piano, that the end result's interpretative vision was something I could not have imagined before starting the recording process. Daring to exploit the expressive potential of the harpsichord and to give up my own rooted conception of the work has revealed new meanings to me, new interpretative possibilities which I continue to process and assimilate.

The second case study illustrates the experience of recording Mozart's Sonata in F major, K.280 on a Robert Brown copy of a fortepiano built by Anton Walter in 1780. The attempt to control the instrument and produce different sound colours revealed the practical side of a historical reality which was familiar to me only in theory: the fact that in Classicism, as in Baroque, the piano technique was based on the agility and sensitivity of the fingers, and did not include large movements of the arm and shoulder. When handling this instrument, any extra movement would translate into a sound inequality, due to its light and shallow keys; and this was but one of the many elements which required adaptation on my side. As in the case of Bach, through numerous references to the attached recording, I have highlighted the moments in which the instrument required a different approach than the modern piano, both technically

and musically. The three groups of parameters analyzed (dynamics and timbre, articulation and phrasing, tempo and agogics) were followed in the case of this sonata by a few observations on the subject of improvised ornaments.

For the third case study, I had the unique opportunity to record Franz Liszt's *Après une lecture du Dante* on a piano which the composer himself played several times: the *Steingraeber-Liszt Piano*, built in 1873 especially for the Rococo Hall in the Steingraeber Historic House in Bayreuth. In addition to the inspiration that such an instrument offers, this piano proved to be a very special one, regarding both its sound and its touch. One of the first things that caught my attention when I came in contact with the instrument was the very marked timbre difference between the registers. I was already familiar with the strong basses and the weak upper register of the Mozartian fortepiano; here, however, due to the crossed strings, the bass had lost its clarity, creating a nebulous but extremely penetrating effect in the bass register. For me, this timbre diversity was a revelation: suddenly, the transcendental character of the music became much clearer, and the parallels with the narration of Dante Alighieri's work became obvious. The experience of recording this work on the *Steingraeber-Liszt* piano was revealing from all points of view. Following it, my vision of the Dante Sonata changed substantially, the historical instrument revealing to me in all its fullness the opposition of the two poles – diabolical and angelic – on which the whole work is built.

The last case study is a comparative study, in which I analyzed two recordings of Beethoven's Sonata op.10 no. 2 in F major, performed on two different instruments placed in the same position in the same space – a recording studio within the Music University in Vienna. The two recording sessions took place a few days apart. The instruments used were a fortepiano built by Robert Brown, a copy of a Viennese instrument made by Michael Rosenberger around 1805, and a recently built Steinway C. This experiment was performed in 2016, in the context of the recordings made for my CD, *Roots*, on which the work appears in the fortepiano version. After recording on the fortepiano, which inspired me with a multitude of new ideas, I returned to the modern piano. The first contact with the instrument was really shocking: for a moment I had the impression that I had never played a modern piano before. The keys seemed huge, heavy, and my musical intentions could not be materialized. A new process of (re)adaptation was therefore needed, one of the most interesting that I had ever experienced, in which on the one hand I was trying to keep the spirit of music discovered through the historical instrument, on the other hand, to put in function the mechanism of a Steinway C, which now seemed enormous to me. I have therefore presented in this case study both processes, adaptation and recording, as well as their sound result, again grouping the analytical parameters into three subchapters.

Chapter 4 represents reflections and conclusions drawn as a result of, on one hand, the experiences gained during the recordings, on the other hand, some comments on seven interviews I made with pianists who focus their international careers on both historical instruments and modern pianos. (The complete interviews, in original and translated, are attached as the first and second addenda of the thesis.) The first theme of reflection is the *Role of the modern piano in the interpretation of the repertoire of the 17th-19th centuries*, in the context of the growing popularity of the historically informed performance practice and of historical instruments. The following question arises: if we are to accept that the modern piano does manage to reproduce very well (albeit not perfectly) the spirit of music composed in

Baroque, Classicism or Romanticism, why don't we try to get even closer to the ideal, playing this repertoire only on historical instruments and giving up the modern piano altogether? With the help of the answers provided by the interviewed musicians and the conclusions drawn from their own interpretive experiences, I wanted to give an idea of how the modern piano is viewed in the current musical context, especially by performers who have come into contact with historical instruments.

The second subchapter, *The contemporary pianist and the symbiosis of interpretative styles*, draws attention to another topic. In a world where an increasing number of pianists perform also on historical instruments, the question which arises is whether we are heading towards a uniformity of interpretative styles, or on the contrary, towards a new type of diversity. In the present moment, we must ask ourselves: is it desirable for things to evolve towards a mixture of the two performing styles? Would the classical music world benefit from the influence which the historically informed performance practice has on modern pianists? Would they in exchange have an influence on the technique used on historical instruments, and would that be beneficial? To what extent would this lead to a new uniformity, after several decades of antagonism between the historically informed and the modern interpretation styles? The answers given by the interviewed musicians helped me to draw certain conclusions and to offer answers to these questions myself, which, far from representing absolute truths, still offer the possibility of a foray into the way of thinking and acting of a contemporary performer.

Throughout the process of scientific research, changes in the perception of the studied phenomenon occur naturally, due to the accumulation of knowledge and experience. In the case of an autoethnographic research such as mine, this phenomenon intensifies and becomes infinitely more complex, since the author of the research is at the same time its object. In such a case, their own change of perception becomes itself a research subject. As difficult as this process may seem, it is just as useful and valuable for the initiator of the research. When studying a living phenomenon such as musical performance, what other means can be better than observing the performer, a living being subject to uninterrupted change? I hope that this research will be an impetus for as many performers as possible to reflect in an analytical and informed way on their own artistic decisions, in line with the message they want to convey to the public of the 21st century.